

All my walls are watercolors now

—"I'm still waiting for you, my heart will always

Pull you in, like gravity."

William

I woke at 5:47 AM to a silence that felt different from every other silence I'd known. For three years, the quiet of my apartment had been a prison—the particular stillness of isolation, of days that blurred into weeks into months into years. For six weeks, the silence had become something else: anticipation, preparation, the held breath before facing the world again. But this morning, the silence felt like an ending.

Today was the last day of "Absence & Light."

I lay in bed, staring at the ceiling that had been my companion through every stage of this journey, and let myself feel the weight of that reality. After today, the exhibition would close. The paintings would be taken down, carefully packaged, transported to whoever had purchased them or returned to storage. The gallery walls would be repainted neutral white, erasing any evidence that my grief had ever hung there.

And Est—Est would no longer have a professional reason to be in my life.

The thought sent a spike of anxiety through my chest, familiar and unwelcome. I'd been managing it for weeks—the particular fear that what we were building was only possible because of the exhibition. That without the structure of scheduled photography sessions and gallery events, we would have nothing. That I was just a project to him, another storm he was learning to photograph and then walk away from.

Dr. Chaisri's words echoed in my mind, from our session two days ago: "Intimacy requires risk. You can't control how someone else will choose you. You can only show up as honestly as possible and trust them to make their own decision."

Easy to say. Harder to believe.

I forced myself out of bed. The physical act of movement helped—putting feet on floor, standing, walking to the bathroom. The rituals of morning that had once felt impossible, now just felt like routine.

The face in the mirror looked different than it had six weeks ago. Still tired, still carrying shadows that wouldn't quite disappear. But there was something else there now. Something that might have been presence. Might have been hope.

"Today is the last day," I told my reflection. "You're going to survive it."

The words felt less like a promise and more like a fact. Somewhere in the past six weeks, survival had stopped being an aspiration and started being something I actually believed in.

Progress. This was progress.

I arrived at the gallery at 2 PM, two hours before the closing event was scheduled to begin. My manager had offered to accompany me, but I'd asked to come alone. This was something I needed to do by myself—one final walk through the exhibition, before the crowds arrived, before the speeches and the photographs and the particular performance of being a public artist.

The gallery was quiet. Staff members moved through the space, arranging tables for the evening's reception, adjusting lighting that had already been adjusted a dozen times. They nodded as I passed but didn't try to engage me in conversation. Maybe My manager had warned them. Maybe they could just tell I needed the silence.

I walked through my exhibition like a stranger.

The paintings that had once felt like pieces of my soul ripped out and displayed—now they looked like art. Just art. Beautiful, maybe. Honest, certainly. But separate from me in a way they hadn't been when I'd created them in the desperate isolation of my studio.

The chaos pieces came first—the violent swirls of color that had represented my worst nights, my darkest thoughts, the particular desperation of a man trying to process emotions too big to contain. I remembered creating each one. The way the brush had moved across canvas without conscious direction. The way I'd sometimes emerged from painting sessions with no memory of the hours that had passed.

Now they hung on white walls, carefully lit, with small placards explaining their significance. Critics had called them "raw" and "honest" and "unflinching." Collectors had paid significant amounts to own pieces of my breakdown.

I still wasn't sure how I felt about that.

The flower series came next—the obsessive renderings of every bloom Lego had brought me over three years of Wednesday visits. Each one a meditation. Each one an attempt to understand something my mother had tried to teach me before she died.

I'd finally learned, I realized. Too late for her to see it, but I'd learned. The flowers weren't just decoration. They were persistence. They were the particular resilience of living things that kept growing, kept blooming, regardless of whether anyone was watching.

I stopped in front of the central piece—my mother's portrait.

She smiled down at me from the canvas, surrounded by the garden she'd loved, her expression carrying all the warmth and wisdom I remembered from childhood. I'd spent three months on this painting, longer than any piece I'd ever created. Had tried to capture not just her face, but her essence—the particular way she'd looked at me when I was struggling, the patience she'd shown when I couldn't understand things that seemed obvious to everyone else.

"I did it, Mae," I whispered. "I let them see."

The portrait didn't respond. It never would. But standing there, in the quiet gallery, with the afternoon light falling soft across her painted face, I felt something settle in my chest.

She would have been proud. Not of the success—she'd never cared much about success—but of the showing up. Of the trying. Of the willingness to be vulnerable in front of strangers, to let my grief become something shared rather than something hoarded.

Go be brave, she'd told me once, when I was young and afraid of everything.

I was finally learning what that meant.

The alcove where "I'm Sorry" hung was at the back of the gallery, tucked away from the main exhibition space like a confession you had to seek out.

I stood in front of it for a long time. Est's face looked back at me—half-rendered in charcoal, caught forever between sketch and painting. His eyes were the most detailed part, amber hints around the irises, the particular intensity he got when he was genuinely curious about something. But the color had never been added. The portrait remained deliberately incomplete.

I'm Sorry.

Two words that contained everything I'd been unable to say. The panic attack. The screaming. The moment I'd pushed him away instead of asking him to stay.

A throat cleared behind me.

I turned to find a man in an expensive suit—one of the collectors I'd been introduced to during the exhibition's opening night. His name escaped me, but his expression was unmistakable: the particular hunger of someone who had decided they wanted something and was prepared to pay for it.

"Mr. Jakrapatr." He extended his hand, and I shook it automatically. "I've been hoping to speak with you about this piece."

"The portrait?"

"Yes. It's extraordinary—quite different from the others. The vulnerability of the composition, the deliberate incompleteness." He studied the painting with the calculating attention of someone who saw art primarily as investment. "I'd like to make an offer."

"It's not for sale." The words came out before I'd fully processed them, but they felt right. Necessary.

The collector's eyebrows rose. "Everything has a price, Mr. Jakrapatr. I'm prepared to offer—"

"Not this one."

"I can assure you, the figure I have in mind is quite—"

"It's not about the figure." I turned back to face the portrait—Est's incomplete face, captured in that moment of possibility I'd never fully understood. "This one stays with me. Until I know how to finish it."

The collector was silent for a moment. I could feel him recalculating, trying to determine if this was a negotiating tactic or genuine refusal.

"I see," he said finally. "Well. If you change your mind, my offer stands."

He handed me a business card and walked away, his footsteps echoing through the quiet gallery. I didn't look at the card. Just tucked it into my pocket and returned my attention to the painting.

Until I know how to finish it.

The words felt like a promise. To Est. To myself. To whatever we might become if we were brave enough to try.

The anxiety hit at 3:30 PM. I was in the back office, reviewing my closing remarks with My manager, when the familiar tightness started building in my chest. The particular sensation of walls closing in, of air becoming difficult, of my body deciding that danger was imminent even though my mind knew better.

"William?" My manager's voice came from far away. "Are you alright?"

"I need—" I couldn't finish the sentence. Couldn't find enough air.

"Okay. Okay, we're going to breathe." She moved closer, her voice calm in that particular way she'd developed over weeks of managing an artist with anxiety. "In for four. You know how this works."

I did know. I'd been doing this for months—the breathing exercises, the grounding techniques, the particular tools that Dr. Chaisri had given me to manage the moments when my brain decided to betray me.

In for four. Hold for four. Out for four.

The counting helped. The rhythm helped. My manager's steady presence helped. But underneath the physical panic, something else was churning. The thoughts I'd been trying to ignore all day.

What if this only works because of the exhibition?

What if without the structure, we have nothing?

What if I'm just a project to him—another storm he's trying to photograph?

"Can you tell me what triggered this?" My manager asked gently.

"Everything. Nothing." I forced myself to keep breathing. "Tonight is the last night. After this, Est and I don't have—we don't have a reason to see each other. Not a professional one."

"And that scares you."

"Yes."

"Because you're afraid of what happens when the excuse disappears?"

I nodded, unable to speak.

My manager was quiet for a moment. Then she said something that surprised me. "I've been watching you two for six weeks. The way you look at each other when you think no one's noticing. The way he positions himself in the room so he can always see where you are. The way you relax when he's nearby and tense up when he leaves."

"What does that mean?"

"It means whatever you're building—it's not about the exhibition. The exhibition is just the context. What's between you is something else entirely."

I wanted to believe her. God, I wanted to believe her.

"What if I mess it up again?"

"Then you mess it up, and you learn, and you try again." She smiled slightly. "That's what relationships are, William. A series of attempts. Some of them work, some of them don't. But you don't find out which is which unless you actually try."

The panic was receding. Slowly. The techniques were working.

"Dr. Chaisri said something similar," I admitted. "About intimacy requiring risk."

"Smart therapist."

I took another deep breath—steadier now, more controlled—and stood.

"I'm okay," I said. "I'm going to be okay."

"I know you are." My manager gathered her papers. "Now let's go over those remarks one more time. You have an audience to wow in an hour."

The gallery transformed as the guests arrived. What had been quiet contemplation space became alive with bodies and voices and the particular energy of people gathered to witness something significant. I watched from near the entrance as collectors and critics and curious strangers filtered through, their faces illuminated by the careful lighting that made my paintings glow.

Est was one of the first to arrive.

He was wearing the clothes that Lego had chosen for him, according to the excited texts I'd received documenting the shopping trip. Dark jacket, white shirt, the particular combination that made him look both professional and effortlessly attractive.

He was beautiful.

The thought hit me with its usual force—the particular awareness of Est that I'd been carrying for months, that had only intensified since we'd started whatever it was we were doing. He moved through the space with his camera ready, capturing the evening as it unfolded, being the professional photographer he'd always been. But every so often, his eyes would find mine across the room. A moment of connection. An acknowledgment that said: I see you. I'm here. This is happening.

And every time, something in my chest loosened.

Behind Est came others—faces I didn't recognize at first, until I realized they were his people. His friends. The circle I'd heard about but never been part of.

Tui was easy to identify—taller than I'd expected, with an artist's hands and an expression that carried both warmth and something more protective. He walked close to Lego, their shoulders almost touching, the particular body language of two people who belonged to each other.

Hong I recognized from Est's descriptions—the silver-haired tattoo artist with the quiet intensity and the surprising capacity for bluntness. He was dressed more

formally than I would have expected, and he carried himself with the confidence of someone who had recently survived his own public exposure.

And Nut—the one who had given Est the job, who had believed in him when he was struggling—was already in work mode, tablet in hand, managing something I couldn't see.

They were all here. Est's whole world, gathered in my gallery, about to witness the closing of something that had changed both our lives.

The thought was terrifying.

The thought was also wonderful.

Lego found me first.

"P'Will!" He materialized at my elbow with his usual impossible energy, looking radiant in something that was probably expensive and was definitely more fashionable than anything I'd ever owned. His knee brace was almost invisible tonight, hidden beneath well-chosen layers. "How are you feeling? You look amazing. Is that the suit we picked? It fits perfectly. Have you eaten? You should eat something before the speech."

"I'm okay." I couldn't help smiling. "You don't have to worry about me."

"I'm always going to worry about you. It's my default setting." He grabbed my arm and started guiding me through the crowd. "Come on. There are people you need to meet."

"Lego—"

"No arguments. This is happening."

He led me to where the others had gathered—a small cluster near one of my chaos pieces, their conversation animated and their attention half on the art around them. Tui looked up as we approached, his expression shifting from relaxed to evaluating as he took in my presence.

"P'Tui," Lego said brightly, "this is P'William. P'Will, this is my boyfriend."

The word boyfriend still carried a particular weight when Lego said it, like he was savoring it on his tongue. Tui's expression softened at the sound—a brief crack in the protective exterior—before he extended his hand.

"William," he said, and his voice was careful. "I've heard a lot about you."

"Good things, I hope."

"Complicated things." But there was the beginning of a smile. "Lego doesn't do simple."

"Neither does P'Will," Lego said cheerfully. "That's why they get along."

I shook Tui's hand, trying to read the man who had become such an important part of Lego's life. There was steadiness there—the particular stability that Lego needed, that grounded his constant motion. But there was also warmth, visible in the way he glanced at Lego, the subtle shift of his body toward the younger man like a plant turning toward light.

"Thank you," I said, "for being good to him."

Tui's eyebrows rose. "That's not—"

"Lego talks about you. All the time. About how you support him, how you make him feel safe." I met his eyes directly. "He deserves that. He deserves someone who sees how extraordinary he is."

Something changed in Tui's expression. The evaluation gave way to something more like understanding.

"He is extraordinary," Tui agreed. "I'm just trying to keep up."

"You're doing better than that." Lego was beaming, his eyes bright with the particular joy of watching people he loved connect. "Now come on—you still need to meet Hong."

Hong was standing slightly apart from the group, his attention fixed on one of my paintings with an intensity that suggested genuine interest rather than polite observation. He turned as we approached, and I was struck by the sharpness of his gaze—the particular attention of someone who was always watching, always analyzing.

"William Jakrapatr," he said, and there was something complicated in his voice. "I've been wanting to meet you."

"Hong." I extended my hand. "Est talks about you."

"Does he." Hong's handshake was firm, his expression unreadable. "He's talked about you too. Quite a lot, actually. Especially during the months when you weren't speaking."

The words landed like a slap. I felt myself flinch.

"I deserved that."

"You did." Hong's voice was flat. "You hurt him. When he was already hurting. You were exactly the kind of person his therapist warned him about—beautiful and



broken and completely unavailable."

"Hong—" Lego started.

"Let me finish." Hong's eyes never left my face. "I spent weeks watching him spiral. Watching him doubt himself. Watching him try to figure out if what you did was somehow his fault."

The guilt was crushing. I'd known, abstractly, that pushing Est away had consequences. But hearing it described—hearing about the spiral, the doubt, the particular pain of someone trying to make sense of being rejected—made it viscerally real.

"I'm sorry," I said. "I know that's not enough. But I am."

Hong studied me for a long moment. Then, unexpectedly, his expression softened.

"You know what Est told me, after the exhibition opening?"

"What?"

"He said you were different. That the person who gave that speech, who talked about therapy and healing and vulnerability—that wasn't the same person who pushed him away." Hong's voice was quieter now. "He said you'd done the work. Actually changed."

"I'm trying to."

"I can see that." Hong glanced at the painting behind him—one of the chaos pieces, a violent swirl of blues and blacks. "This work is honest. Painfully honest. That takes a particular kind of courage."

"Or desperation."

"Sometimes they're the same thing." A ghost of a smile crossed Hong's face. "I had my own exhibition recently. University show. I know what it feels like to hang your soul on a wall and wait for strangers to judge it."

"How did it go?"

"Terrifying. But I survived." He looked back at me. "I suppose that's the lesson, isn't it? We survive the things we think will destroy us."

"I'm still learning that."

"We all are."

Something shifted between us—the particular recognition of two people who understood something about each other's pain. Hong extended his hand again, and

this time the handshake felt different. Less evaluation, more acknowledgment.

"Don't hurt him again," Hong said quietly. "Not because I'll kill you—though I might—but because he's finally starting to believe he deserves better. Don't prove him wrong."

"I won't," I said. "At least—I'll try not to. I can't promise perfection. But I can promise I'll try."

Hong nodded slowly. "That's more honest than most people manage."

Nut was easier.

He approached me with a professional handshake and the kind of calm efficiency that suggested he viewed this evening primarily as work—which, technically, it was. He'd been instrumental in getting Est the exhibition photography job. He was instrumental now in managing some aspect of the event I didn't fully understand.

"Mr. Jakrapatr," he said. "The exhibition has been remarkable. Est's photos are going to be featured in several publications."

"He deserves the recognition."

"He does." Nut studied me with an expression that was harder to read than Hong's outright hostility. "He's very talented. And very—devoted to his work."

There was subtext there. I could hear it, even if I couldn't quite parse it.

"I know." I said carefully.

"Good." Nut smiled, and it was the kind of smile that suggested he knew more than he was saying. "Just—keep that in mind. He has a bright future ahead of him. It would be unfortunate if anything derailed that."

Before I could respond, he'd moved away, absorbed back into whatever professional responsibilities had brought him here.

Tui caught my eye across the room. Something passed between us—a moment of silent communication—and then he was walking toward me, leaving Lego in animated conversation with Hong about something that involved elaborate hand gestures.

"Can I talk to you?" Tui asked. "Privately."

"Of course."

We moved to a quieter corner of the gallery, away from the main crowd. Tui's

expression had shifted from the warmth he showed Lego to something more serious.

"I need to say something," he began. "And I need you to listen."

"Okay."

"Est is my best friend. Has been since university. I've known him through every disaster and every recovery and every moment of growth." Tui's voice was level but intense. "I've watched him fall for unavailable people. I've watched him lose himself in other people's chaos. I've watched him nearly destroy himself trying to be enough for people who couldn't love him back."

"I know—"

"Let me finish." Tui's eyes were steady. "He's different now. He's done the work. He knows his worth. And I'm not going to let anyone—including you—undo that progress."

"I wouldn't—"

"If you hurt him again—if you disappear or push him away or do any of the things that damaged artists do when they get scared—I will make your life very difficult." Tui's voice was calm, almost conversational, which made it more threatening. "Not because I'm violent. But because Lego is my world, and Est is his family, and I protect my family."

I should have been intimidated. Maybe I was. But something about Tui's words—the particular fierceness of someone defending the people they loved—made me feel something unexpected.

Relief.

"Good." I said.

Tui blinked. "Good?"

"Est deserves people who will fight for him. Who will look out for him. Who will threaten to make life difficult for anyone who hurts him." I met Tui's eyes. "I'm glad he has that. I'm glad he has you."

For a moment, Tui just stared at me. Then, slowly, his expression shifted.

"You're not what I expected." he said.

"What did you expect?"

"Someone more—" He paused, searching for the word. "Defensive. Artists usually get prickly when you threaten them."

"I've been threatened by better than you." I smiled slightly. "My father, my critics, my own brain on a daily basis. A protective best friend barely registers."

Tui laughed—a short, surprised sound that seemed to surprise even him.

"Maybe you're not completely hopeless." he said.

"That's the nicest thing anyone's said to me all day."

"Don't let it go to your head."

We stood in silence for a moment, the energy between us shifting from confrontation to something more like understanding. Tui was looking at me differently now—still evaluating, but with less hostility.

"He talks about you, you know," Tui said quietly. "Est. All the time. About your paintings and your therapy progress and that ridiculous house you're renovating."

"The house isn't ridiculous."

"It sounds ridiculous. Who plants marigolds in the middle of a construction zone?"

"They're very resilient."

"So I've heard." Tui's voice softened. "He's been different since he met you. Even during the hard parts—especially during the hard parts—there was something about him that seemed more alive. More present."

"Is that a good thing?"

"I think so. I hope so." Tui glanced across the room at Lego, who was now showing Hong something on his phone with great enthusiasm. "I know what it's like to love someone you weren't sure you deserved. To feel like happiness was something you had to earn rather than just—accept."

"How did you get past that?"

"I'm not sure I have. But I'm working on it. Every day." He looked back at me. "That's the job, I think. Showing up even when you're scared. Trusting that the other person will keep choosing you. Being brave enough to let them."

"You sound like my therapist."

"Therapy is apparently contagious. Everyone in our friend group has caught it."

I laughed—a real laugh, the kind that surprised me with its genuineness. "I like you." I said.

"Don't push it." But Tui was smiling. "Now come on. You have closing remarks to

give, and Est keeps staring at you from across the room. It's getting distracting."

The speech was easier this time. Not easy—nothing about public speaking would ever be easy for someone wired like me—but easier. The six weeks of practice had helped. The repeated exposure to crowds. The gradual understanding that I could survive being seen, even when being seen felt like being flayed. I stood at the small podium, looking out at the gathered faces, and felt my heart rate spike in the familiar way. But beneath the anxiety was something else. Confidence, maybe. Or just the particular calm of someone who had already done the hardest thing.

"Six weeks ago," I began, "I stood here terrified that showing you my grief would destroy me."

The words came out steadier than I expected. I found Est in the crowd—camera lowered, eyes fixed on my face—and let his presence anchor me.

"I thought that letting people see my pain would make it worse. That vulnerability was weakness. That the walls I'd built around myself were protection rather than prison." I paused, letting the silence settle. "I was wrong."

Murmurs rippled through the crowd. The critics shifted in their seats.

"This exhibition has taught me something I didn't expect to learn. It's taught me that being seen—truly seen, in all your mess and struggle—doesn't destroy you. It heals you. Not immediately. Not completely. But in ways that matter."

I thought about Est. About the way he'd looked at me during those early photography sessions, like I was something worth studying. About the attention he'd paid when everyone else had written me off as a lost cause.

"The real lesson of 'Absence & Light' isn't about grief or loss or the particular pain of missing someone you loved. It's about what happens after. It's about learning that you can carry absence without being crushed by it. That you can walk into the thing that scares you most and discover you can survive."

I looked directly at Est. His camera was still lowered. His expression was—I couldn't read it. Couldn't parse the particular combination of emotions playing across his face. But his eyes were fixed on mine, and that was enough.

"I want to thank everyone who came tonight, and everyone who has visited over the past six weeks. I want to thank the critics who engaged with this work honestly—even the ones who hated it. I want to thank my manager, my therapist, and everyone who has supported me through what has been the most difficult and rewarding experience of my life."

The words I'd rehearsed were running out. The words I hadn't planned were rising

up to take their place.

"And I want to thank the people who didn't give up on me. Who brought me flowers every Wednesday even when I couldn't name them. Who photographed me with honesty instead of flattery. Who showed me that being broken wasn't a permanent condition—just a temporary state that could be changed with enough work and enough love."

Lego was crying. I could see him wiping his eyes, his careful makeup definitely ruined. Beside him, Tui had an arm around his shoulders, holding him close. "Six weeks ago, I was terrified," I said. "Tonight, I'm grateful. For all of it. Even the parts that hurt."

I stepped back from the podium.

The applause started slowly and built into something thunderous. I stood there, letting it wash over me, feeling something I hadn't felt in years.

Pride.

Not the desperate need for validation that had driven so much of my early career. Just—pride. In what I'd accomplished. In who I was becoming.

I'd done it.

I'd really done it.

The rest of the evening passed in a blur of congratulations and conversations and the particular exhaustion of being present for hours. But throughout it all, I was aware of Est.

He moved through the space with his camera, documenting everything, being the professional photographer he'd always been. But our orbits kept intersecting—a moment of eye contact across the room, a brush of shoulders as we passed, a shared smile when something funny happened.

Each moment of connection carried weight. Each glance said something we hadn't put into words yet.

I watched him laugh at something Tui said—throwing his head back, his whole body relaxing into genuine amusement—and felt a complicated mixture of emotions. Jealousy, maybe, at the easy intimacy he shared with his friends. But also something healthier. Something that looked like gratitude. Est had a life. He had friends who loved him, a career that was thriving, a sense of self that didn't depend on me. His happiness existed independently of what we might become.

That was good. That was healthy.

That was exactly what Dr. Chaisri had been trying to help me understand.

You don't need someone to complete you, he'd said. You need someone to complement you. To add to a life that's already whole.

Est's life was whole. Mine was getting there.

Maybe that was why this felt different from everything that had come before.

At 9:45 PM, the same collector approached me again. "Mr. Jakrapatr." He was more persistent than I'd given him credit for. "I've been thinking about your refusal to sell the unfinished portrait."

"My position hasn't changed."

"I understand that. But I wanted to—" He paused, choosing his words carefully. "I wanted to tell you that I respect it. The refusal. It's clear that piece means something beyond commerce."

I hadn't expected that. "Thank you." I said, uncertain what else to say.

"Art isn't just investment, despite what people like me sometimes pretend." He smiled slightly. "Sometimes it's—sacred, for lack of a better word. Some pieces aren't meant to be owned. They're meant to be held."

"I didn't think collectors believed that."

"Most don't. But I wasn't always a collector. I was an artist once, before the money became more interesting than the making." His eyes drifted to the alcove where "I'm Sorry" hung. "I had a piece like that once. One I should have kept. I sold it, and I've regretted it ever since."

"What happened to it?"

"It's in a private collection somewhere. I don't know where exactly. Just—gone. Like it never mattered to me at all." He looked back at me. "Keep your portrait, Mr. Jakrapatr. Keep it until you know how to finish it. Some things are worth more than money."

He walked away before I could respond, disappearing into the crowd.

I stood there, processing the encounter, when I heard Est's voice behind me.

"What was that about?"

I turned. He was standing a few feet away, camera lowered, expression curious.

"The unfinished portrait," I said. "He wanted to buy it."

"And you refused?"

"I told him it wasn't for sale. That it stays with me until I know how to finish it."

Something shifted in Est's expression. Understanding, maybe. Or something deeper.

"Until you know how to finish it." he repeated softly.

"It's incomplete," I said. "The portrait. Our story. Everything about what we were and what we might become." I took a breath. "I couldn't sell an ending we haven't written yet."

Est was quiet for a long moment. The noise of the gallery faded into background static.

"William—"

"I know we need to talk," I said quickly. "About what happens now. About—everything. But I wanted you to know that. The portrait stays with me. You stay with me. Whatever form that takes."

His expression was complicated—layers of emotion I couldn't quite parse.

"After the event," he said finally. "We'll talk. Properly."

"Okay."

"There's something I need to tell you. Something important."

My heart clenched. "Good important or bad important?"

"Different important." He smiled slightly, and there was something in it I couldn't quite read. "But not here. Not now. Later."

"Later." I agreed.

He raised his camera and took a photograph—of me, standing in my gallery, surrounded by the evidence of everything I'd survived.

"For the record," he said quietly. "You did it. You survived."

"We both did."

"Yeah." His smile widened, carrying something that looked like hope. "We both did."



At 10:30 PM, the gallery doors closed. The staff began the careful work of cleaning up, but I barely noticed. Because Lego was organizing something—pulling people together, making plans, being the particular force of nature he'd always been.

"Dinner," he announced. "All of us. There's a restaurant nearby that's open late. I called ahead."

"Lego—" I started.

"No arguments." His expression was fierce. "This is your night, P'Will. The exhibition was a success. You survived it. We're celebrating."

I looked around at the gathered faces—Tui with his arm around Lego's waist, Hong looking slightly less hostile than before, Nut already checking his phone for directions, and Est, watching me with an expression that made my heart do complicated things.

"Okay," I said. "Let's celebrate."

The restaurant was small and warm, the kind of place that had been there for decades and would probably be there for decades more. Red lanterns hung from the ceiling. The walls were covered with photographs of customers spanning generations. The smell of food was incredible.

We claimed a large table in the back—the kind of table that suggested the staff was used to accommodating groups who wanted privacy. Lego immediately took charge of ordering, consulting with Tui about preferences and allergies with the particular competence of someone who had done this many times.

I found myself sitting across from Est, with Hong on one side and Nut on the other. The positioning felt deliberate—Lego's doing, probably—and I was grateful for it.

"So," Hong said, picking up a menu. "How does it feel? The exhibition being over?"

"Surreal," I admitted. "Six weeks ago, I could barely leave my apartment. Now—"

"Now you're having dinner with strangers in a restaurant." Hong's voice carried the ghost of a smile. "That's a lot of progress."

"You're not strangers."

"We literally met three hours ago."

"You're Est's friends. That makes you—" I paused, searching for the right word. "That makes you people I want to know."

Something shifted in Hong's expression. The last traces of hostility fading into something more like acceptance.

"Fair enough," he said. "I suppose that goes both ways."

The food arrived in waves—dishes I couldn't name but trusted Lego to have ordered thoughtfully. I found myself eating more than I had in weeks, the particular pleasure of shared meals breaking through the anxiety that usually made eating difficult.

The conversation flowed easily. Art, first—Hong and I discovered a shared appreciation for certain techniques, certain artists, certain ways of thinking about creation. Then lighter topics: Lego's upcoming dance performances, Tui's tattoo studio, Nut's complicated work schedule.

I listened as much as I spoke, absorbing the particular dynamics of this group. The way Lego and Tui communicated with glances. The way Hong's sarcasm hid genuine affection. The way Nut's calm professionalism masked something warmer beneath the surface.

And Est—

Est was watching me. Every time I looked up, his eyes were on my face. Studying me. Seeing something I wasn't sure I understood.

"What?" I asked finally, during a lull in the conversation.

"You fit." he said simply.

"What do you mean?"

"Here. With us. You fit." His smile was soft. "I wasn't sure you would. I hoped—but I wasn't sure."

"I wasn't sure either."

"But you do. You fit."

The words settled into my chest like a gift I hadn't known I needed.

After dinner, the group began to disperse.

Tui and Lego were sharing a taxi home—Lego yawning dramatically, his earlier energy finally flagging. Hong and Nut were heading in a different direction, something about picking up a late-night coffee that seemed like a thin excuse for wanting time alone. Which left Est and me, standing on the sidewalk outside the restaurant, the night air warm around us.

"Walk with me?" he asked.

"Where?"

"Anywhere. I just—I need to tell you something, and I'd rather do it while moving."

We started walking. No destination, just movement—the particular rhythm of two people who needed to be in motion to have a difficult conversation.

For a while, neither of us spoke. The city settled around us, quieter than during the day but still alive with the particular energy of Bangkok at night. Neon signs flickered. Distant music played from clubs we'd never enter. The smell of street food drifted from vendors who never seemed to close.

"I got a job offer," Est said finally. "A few weeks ago."

"Okay."

"It's a photography job. For a tour. A major group doing concerts across Asia."

I felt something tighten in my chest. "That sounds incredible."

"It is incredible. It's—" He stopped walking, turning to face me. "It's everything I've ever wanted. Traveling. Photographing. Seeing all the places I've only seen in other people's pictures."

"Est, that's wonderful—"

"It's three months."

The words landed like stones.

"Three months." I repeated.

"Japan. Korea. Taiwan. The Philippines. Singapore. Malaysia. Three months away from Bangkok. Away from—" He gestured vaguely. "Away from everything."

I stood very still, processing.

Three months. Ninety days. A quarter of a year.

Three months during which Est would be on the other side of the world, living the dream he'd been carrying since he was a teenager. Three months during which I would be— Here. In Bangkok. Renovating a house. Managing an art career. Trying to figure out how to exist in a world that still felt overwhelming.

"Did you accept?" I asked.

"Yes."

Another stone. This one heavier.

"When do you leave?"

"Two weeks. There's prep time before the actual tour starts."

Two weeks. Fourteen days. The number felt impossibly small.

"William—" Est's voice cracked. "Say something."

I looked at him—at the face I'd painted and photographed and memorized. At the person who had seen me at my worst and hadn't run away. At the man who had taught me that being seen could be healing instead of destroying.

And I felt—

I felt happy for him.

Genuinely, truly happy.

"That's amazing," I said. "Est, that's amazing."

His expression shifted—surprise, then confusion. "You're not—upset?"

"Why would I be upset?"

"Because I'm leaving. For three months. Right when we're—" He gestured between us. "Right when this is becoming something."

"You've been working toward this your entire life." I stepped closer, close enough to see the particular way the streetlight caught his eyes. "You've told me about the dreams. The magazine pictures you cut out as a teenager. The places you wanted to photograph. This is that dream, Est. It's actually happening."

"But what about—"

"Us?" I took a breath. "What about us?"

"We're just starting. We haven't even defined what we are. How can we survive three months apart?"

"Easily," I said. "Or not easily—probably not easily. But we can."

"How do you know?"

"Because—" I reached out, carefully, and took his hand. "Because I've spent three years learning how to survive things I thought would destroy me. Because I know what it's like to be isolated, to feel cut off from the world, to wonder if connection is even possible anymore. And if I can survive all that—if we can build something in the middle of my worst years—then three months of distance is nothing."

"William—"

"I'm going to miss you," I said, and my voice cracked on the words. "Every day."

Every hour. I'm going to miss you so much it will hurt. But I'm not going to ask you to give up your dream for something that hasn't even fully formed yet. That's not what love is."

Est stared at me. "Love?"

The word hung between us, dangerous and electric.

"I—" I hadn't meant to say it. Hadn't planned it. But now that it was out there, I couldn't take it back. "I don't know what to call this. I don't know if it's love, or the beginning of love, or just—connection. But I know I care about you. I know I want you to be happy. And I know that your happiness isn't dependent on whether you're standing next to me."

"That's very evolved."

"I've been in therapy."

He laughed—a surprised, wet sound that was half-sob. "You keep saying that."

"It keeps being relevant."

We stood there, in the middle of a Bangkok sidewalk, holding hands like teenagers. Like two people who were just starting to figure out what they might become.

"Three months," Est said. "We stay in touch. Video calls. Messages. Whatever we can manage."

"Whatever we can manage." I agreed.

"And when I come back—"

"We pick up where we left off. Or wherever we are by then. We figure it out."

"You make it sound simple."

"It's not simple. But it's possible." I squeezed his hand. "You're worth waiting for, Est. This is worth waiting for."

His eyes were bright. Wet. Full of something I couldn't quite name.

"I was so scared to tell you," he admitted. "I thought—I was afraid you'd be angry. Or hurt. Or that it would prove we couldn't work, that we needed the structure of the exhibition to stay connected."

"Is that what you thought?"

"It's what my anxiety thought. The loudest voice in my head kept saying this was too fragile, too new. That three months would kill it."

"What do you think now?"

"I think—" He took a breath. "I think maybe fragile isn't the right word. Maybe new things aren't fragile. Maybe they're just—untested. And you don't find out how strong something is until you test it."

"So this is a test."

"The first of many, probably."

"I'm good at tests," I said. "I'm actually terrible at tests. I failed most of them in school."

"Same. Math was a particular nightmare."

"Geography. I could never remember which countries were where."

"Ironical, given I'm about to photograph six of them."

We both laughed—the particular release of tension that came from finding humor in anxiety.

"We're going to be okay," I said. "I don't know how I know that, but I do."

"You sound certain."

"I'm trying something new. It's called optimism. My therapist recommended it."

"How's that working out?"

"I'm committed to the experiment."

Est smiled—that particular smile, the one I'd seen during our early sessions, before the complications had set in. The one that made everything feel possible.

"I'm glad I met you," he said. "I'm glad I took this job. I'm glad we planted seedlings together and talked about resilience and figured out that maybe we could be something."

"Even if that something has to survive three months of distance?"

"Especially then." He moved closer, close enough that I could feel his breath, his warmth. "Some things are worth waiting for."

"That's what I've been telling myself."

"Have you?"

"Every day. Since the moment I realized I'd pushed you away."

"And now?"

"Now—" I looked at him. At the face I'd memorized. At the person I was choosing. "Now I'm going to stop pushing. And start holding on."

"Is that a promise?"

"It's a start."

We were still standing on the sidewalk when he kissed me. It wasn't like the first kiss—the desperate, fevered collision that had happened months ago, when everything was complicated and I wasn't ready for any of it. This was different. Slower. Intentional. His hands found my face, cradling it gently. His lips met mine with a softness that made something break open in my chest.

This was a beginning.

Not the frantic grasping of two people who didn't know what they were doing. But the careful, deliberate connection of two people who had chosen each other. Who were choosing each other.

I leaned into him, letting myself feel it—the particular warmth of being close to someone, the safety of being held, the quiet thunder of my heart against his.

When we finally pulled apart, we were both breathing harder than before.

"That was better than the first time." I said.

"Everything is better the second time. When you're ready for it."

"Is that a philosophy?"

"It's experience." He smiled against my lips. "We're going to be okay, William."

"You keep saying that."

"I'm going to keep saying it until we both believe it."

I pulled him into another kiss—shorter this time, but no less meaningful. A promise sealed in the particular language of bodies instead of words.

"Three months." I said when we separated.

"Three months."

"I'm going to miss you every day."

"I'm going to miss you every hour."

"That's more than I said."

"I'm competitive." His smile was bright. "Now come on. Walk me to a taxi. My friends are going to want a full report, and I need to figure out how much to tell them."

"Everything," I suggested. "Tell them everything."

"That might take a while."

"We have time." I took his hand again, interlacing our fingers. "Not three months. But enough."

That night, I called Est. We talked for hours—about the exhibition, about the job, about what the next few months would look like. About the logistics of long-distance connection and the emotional challenges we'd inevitably face. But we also talked about other things. Lighter things. The particular comfort of conversation that doesn't have to be about anything important.

He told me about the group he'd be photographing—their music, their aesthetic, the particular challenges of tour photography. I told him about the house renovation, about Lego's elaborate garden plans, about the seedlings that were now actual plants reaching toward the light.

"Send me pictures," he said. "Of the house. Of the garden. Of everything."

"Every day?"

"Every day. I want to see what I'm missing."

"You're not missing much. Construction is not visually interesting."

"You're visually interesting. That counts."

I laughed, lying on my bed, staring at my ceiling, feeling something I hadn't felt in years.

Happy.

Actually, genuinely happy.

"I should sleep," Est said eventually. "Tomorrow's going to be complicated."

"What's tomorrow?"

"Telling everyone else. Sorting logistics. Panicking about whether I packed the right equipment." He yawned. "The usual pre-adventure chaos."



"You'll be fine."

"I know. I just like having someone to worry with."

"I'm very good at worrying."

"I've noticed." His voice softened. "Goodnight, William."

"Goodnight, Est."

I hung up and lay there in the darkness, feeling the particular weight of contentment settling into my bones. Tomorrow, things would be complicated. The next few months would be complicated. But tonight—

Tonight, I was going to let myself be happy.

Tonight, I was going to believe that some things really could work out.

Tonight, I had someone waiting for me. And I had something to wait for.

I dreamed in color that night.

Not the chaos colors of my breakdown paintings—not the violent reds and desperate blacks that had represented everything I couldn't process. Different colors. Softer. Warmer.

The gold of morning light through Est's hair.

The green of seedlings reaching toward the sun.

The particular shade of purple that Lego's butterfly pea tea turned when you added lemon.

The silver of Hong's hair catching gallery lights.

The white of my mother's frangipani blossoms.

I woke with the images still vivid, still present, still carrying the particular weight of something significant.

For three years, I had lived in grayscale. Had convinced myself that color was for other people—for those who could still feel things, who hadn't been hollowed out by grief. But color was coming back.

Not all at once. Not completely. But in pieces. In moments. In the particular gradients that meant healing was happening, even when you couldn't see it.

Three months until Est came home.

Three months of video calls and messages and the particular loneliness of missing

someone who was worth missing. But also: three months of renovation progress. Three months of therapy. Three months of learning to be a person who could exist in the world, even when the world was overwhelming.

Three months to become someone worth coming home to.

I could do that.

I was already doing that.

And somewhere, in a city that was starting to wake up around me, Est was doing the same thing. Growing. Changing. Becoming.

We were going to be different people when we saw each other again.

That was terrifying.

That was also beautiful.

That was what love meant, maybe—not staying the same, but growing together, even when you were growing apart.

I got out of bed and made coffee.

The day was waiting.

And for the first time in three years, I was ready to meet it.

The next morning, I woke at 7 AM and didn't immediately spiral.

That felt significant.

I went through my morning routine—the rituals that had once felt impossible, now just felt like habits. Shower, coffee, medication. The particular sequence of actions that anchored me to the present.

My phone buzzed with a text from Lego:

Lego: Good morning, P'Will!!!! I heard you and P'Est finally figured things out!!! I'm so happy I could cry!!! (I already cried last night but I could do it again!!!)

Lego: [Image attached]

The image was a selfie of Lego, clearly just woken up, with elaborate tear tracks still visible on his cheeks. Behind him, Tui was visible, still asleep, one arm thrown possessively across Lego's pillow.

William: You look terrible.

Lego: I look EMOTIONAL. There's a difference.

William: Thank you. For last night. For introducing me to everyone.

Lego: You're family, P'Will. You were always going to meet them eventually.

Lego: I'm just glad it went well.

William: Me too.

Lego: Are you okay? With Est leaving?

I thought about it. Really thought about it.

William: I'm going to miss him. But I'm also proud of him. He's doing the thing he's always dreamed of. How could I not support that?

Lego: That's very mature of you.

William: Therapy.

Lego: Therapy should get a medal for what it's done to our friend group.

William: I'll suggest it at my next session.

Another text came through—this one from Est.

Est: Good morning.

Est: I just realized I don't have a photo of you. Like, a recent one. For when I'm traveling.

William: You have approximately two thousand photos of me from the exhibition.

Est: Those are professional photos. I want a personal one.

William: What's the difference?

Est: Professional photos show who you are to the world. Personal photos show who you are to me.

My heart did something complicated.

William: I don't have any personal photos of myself.

Est: Then I'll take one. Before I leave.

Est: Something just for me. Something I can look at when I miss you.

William: You're going to miss me?

Est: Every day. Every hour. We established this.

William: Just checking. Making sure you remember.

Est: I remember everything, William. Everything.

I set down my phone and looked around my apartment.

The same space I'd been trapped in for three years. The same walls, the same windows, the same ceiling crack I'd memorized during a thousand sleepless nights. But it didn't feel like a prison anymore.

It felt like home.

A home I could leave. A home I could return to. A home that was part of a life instead of a substitute for one.

I walked to the window—the one I'd opened that first morning, the one that still let Bangkok's air filter in—and looked out at the city.

Somewhere out there, Est was starting his day. Planning his adventure. Getting ready to see the world I'd been too afraid to engage with. And I was going to be here. Renovating a house. Continuing therapy. Becoming the person I wanted to be.

We were going to grow. Separately. Together. In whatever complicated combination of those things love actually meant.

Three months felt like a long time.

It also felt like nothing. Like a breath. Like the pause between one chapter and the next.

I pulled out my phone and typed one more message.

William: I'm proud of you.

Est: For what?

William: For chasing your dream. For being brave. For trusting that what we're building can survive distance.

Est: I'm proud of you too.

William: For what?

Est: For opening windows. For leaving your apartment. For letting me in.

William: That sounds like a lot of progress.

Est: It is a lot of progress. Don't downplay it.

William: Okay. I won't.

William: I love you.

The words sent before I could overthink them. True in a way I couldn't quite explain.

Three dots appeared. Disappeared. Appeared again.

Est: I love you too.

Est: I wasn't sure I should say it yet. It feels fast.

William: It feels right.

Est: Yeah. It does.

Est: I have to go. Logistics meeting with Nut.

Est: But I'll call you tonight?

William: I'll be here.

Est: I know.

Est: That's the point.

Fourteen days.

That's what we had. Fourteen days before Est boarded a plane and disappeared into a dream that would take him across six countries, through countless concert venues, into a life I could only imagine from the photographs he'd send me.

Fourteen days felt like both an eternity and nothing at all.

I woke on the first morning of our countdown with a particular determination I hadn't felt since—well, since before everything fell apart. The anxiety was still there, humming beneath my skin like a low electrical current, but there was something else too. Purpose. Direction. The particular energy of someone who knew exactly what they wanted to do with their limited time.

I wanted to spend every possible moment with Est. Not in the desperate, consuming way I might have wanted things before therapy. Not in the way that would have made me cling and smother and eventually drive him away. But in the intentional way—the way that said I choose you, I see you, I want to know every piece of your world before you go.

My phone buzzed with his morning text.

Est: Day one of fourteen. What's the plan?

William: I'm making you breakfast.

Est: You cook?

William: I make excellent toast. Lego taught me how to make scrambled eggs that are actually edible. I have fruit.

Est: That's a very specific menu.

William: It's an honest menu. Come over?

Est: Already on my way.

I smiled at my phone like the lovesick disaster I apparently was, then spent the next twenty minutes frantically cleaning my kitchen and triple-checking that I actually had all the ingredients I'd promised.

Est arrived at 9 AM with his camera bag over his shoulder—because of course he brought his camera, even to breakfast—and an expression that made something warm bloom in my chest.

"You're really making me breakfast." he said, stepping into my apartment and looking around like he was seeing it for the first time. Which, in some ways, he was. He'd been here for photography sessions, but never just to be here. Never just because I'd invited him.

"I really am." I gestured toward the kitchen, where I'd laid out everything with perhaps more care than breakfast warranted. Fresh fruit arranged in a bowl I'd actually washed. Eggs ready to be scrambled. Bread that wasn't even slightly stale. "Fair warning: my cooking skills are limited."

"I'm not here for the cooking."

"What are you here for?"

He set down his camera bag and crossed the space between us, stopping close enough that I could feel his warmth, could smell the particular scent of him—coffee and something clean, like laundry detergent and possibility.

"You," he said simply. "I'm here for you."

The kiss was soft. Unhurried. The particular intimacy of two people who had stopped rushing toward anything and started savoring everything. His hands found my waist, pulling me closer, and I let myself lean into him—let myself feel the solidity of his body against mine, the particular safety of being held.

"Okay," I said, my voice rougher than I'd intended. "But I'm still making you eggs."

"I wouldn't dream of stopping you."

Breakfast was imperfect and exactly right. The eggs were slightly overcooked—Lego's technique apparently required more practice than I'd given it—and the toast was one shade past golden. But Est ate everything with the enthusiasm of someone who understood that the effort mattered more than the execution.

We sat at my dining table, which I'd actually cleaned for the first time in months, looking out at the Bangkok skyline through my floor-to-ceiling windows. Our chairs were pushed close together, close enough that our knees touched beneath the table—a small point of contact that I found myself hyperaware of throughout the meal.

"I never noticed how beautiful this view is," Est said, gesturing with his fork at the city spread below us. "During the sessions, I was always focused on the light quality. I never just—looked."

"I stopped seeing it years ago. It became background noise."

"And now?"

I looked at the city—the chaos and beauty of millions of lives being lived, the constant motion that had once terrified me and was slowly becoming something else. Then I looked at Est, at the way the morning light caught his profile, at the particular softness in his expression.

"Now I'm trying to see it again. The way you see things. Through the lens of someone who finds beauty in everything."

"That's very poetic for 9 AM."

"I've been practicing."

"Practicing poetry?"

"Practicing paying attention." I reached across the table and took his hand, interlacing our fingers with a naturalness that still surprised me. "You taught me that. That seeing is a skill. That you have to choose to notice things, or they disappear into background."

Est's expression softened. He lifted our joined hands and pressed a kiss to my knuckles—a gesture so tender it made my chest ache. "I didn't teach you anything. You already knew how to see. You just forgot for a while."

"Maybe. But you reminded me."

After breakfast, we migrated to my couch—the expensive one I'd never really used, that had been more furniture than comfort during my years of isolation. Now it became something else: a nest, a sanctuary, a place where we could exist together without agenda. Est curled against my side, his head on my shoulder. I could feel him breathing, could feel the particular rhythm of his body against mine.

"Tell me something," he said. "Something you've never told anyone."

"That's a big request for day one."

"We only have fourteen days. I want to know everything."

I thought about it. About all the things I'd kept hidden, all the thoughts too dark or too strange to share. But with Est—with his weight against me, his breath warm on my neck—the walls felt less necessary.

"I used to talk to my ceiling," I said. "During the worst of it. The worst nights. I would lie in bed and have conversations with the crack in the plaster, like it was a friend. Like it understood me."

"That's not strange. That's survival."

"It felt strange. It felt like proof that I'd lost my mind entirely."

"You hadn't lost your mind. You were just alone for too long." He shifted, looking up at me. "You're not alone anymore."

"I know." I kissed his forehead, letting my lips linger. "That's the thing I'm still getting used to."

We stayed on the couch for hours, talking and not talking, existing in the particular comfort of shared space. Sometimes Est would tell me things—stories from his university days, memories of his childhood before everything went wrong, the dreams he'd carried for so long. Sometimes we were just quiet, letting the silence speak. At some point, I realized this was what I'd been missing for three years. Not just company, but this—the particular intimacy of being known. Of letting someone see the messy, unfinished parts of you and having them stay anyway.

"Day one of fourteen," Est murmured, sometime in the late afternoon. "Thirteen more to go."

"We should make them count."

"We will." He tilted his head up and kissed me—slow, thorough, the kind of kiss that made time stop mattering. "We definitely will."

On day thirteen, Est took me to his apartment. I'd been curious about his space for



months—had imagined it during our time apart, had tried to picture where he lived and worked and healed. But imagination couldn't capture the reality.

His apartment was small. Much smaller than mine. But it was alive in a way my space had never been, even before the isolation. Plants on every surface—windowsills crowded with greenery, hanging baskets trailing vines, a small collection of succulents arranged on a bookshelf like they were art. Books stacked in precarious towers, organized by some system I couldn't parse. Photography equipment laid out with careful precision on a desk by the window. The walls covered with prints—not his own work, but images he'd collected, scenes that had caught his eye and demanded to be preserved.

"It's not much," Est said, watching me take in the space. "But it's mine."

"It's perfect."

"It's messy."

"It's you."

I walked through the small space, touching things gently, trying to understand the person who lived here through the objects he'd surrounded himself with. A coffee mug with a chipped handle, clearly well-loved. A blanket thrown over the back of a chair, soft and worn. A stack of photography magazines with pages flagged and annotated. And then I saw it. The painting I'd sent him—my hands holding a rose—displayed on a small table where the morning light would catch it. It was positioned carefully, intentionally, like it was something precious.

"You kept it." I said, my voice barely a whisper.

"Of course I kept it."

"You display it. Where you can see it every morning."

"It's the first thing I look at when I wake up." Est moved to stand beside me, our shoulders touching. "It reminds me that someone was paying attention. That even when you were drowning, you noticed something gentle."

"Est—"

"That's what it means to me. That's why it's there."

I turned to look at him—at the face I'd painted and photographed and memorized. At the person who had found meaning in my clumsy attempt at apology.

"I want to paint you again," I said. "Properly. When you come back."

"What would you paint?"

"Everything. Every version of you. The way you look when you're concentrating on a shot. The way you laugh when something surprises you. The way you look right now, in this light, in this space you've built for yourself."

"That's a lot of paintings."

"We have time." I took his hand. "Not now. But eventually. We have all the time in the world."

We spent the afternoon in his apartment, doing nothing of consequence and everything of importance. Est showed me his photography archives—years of work organized on hard drives and in physical prints, thousands of images that told the story of how he saw the world. There were pictures of Bangkok at dawn, the city soft and golden before the chaos began. Pictures of strangers caught in unguarded moments—a woman laughing on a bus, a child chasing pigeons, an elderly couple holding hands on a bench.

And pictures of his friends. Tui, serious and focused while tattooing. Lego mid-dance, his body impossibly graceful. Hong surrounded by his designs, looking skeptical at the camera. Nut gesturing enthusiastically about something, his whole body animated with excitement.

"This is how you see them," I said, scrolling through the images. "This is who they are to you."

"Everyone has a lens. Mine just happens to be visible."

"What's my lens?"

"Paint." He settled beside me on his small couch, close enough that we were sharing warmth. "You see the world in color and texture. In the way light falls on surfaces. In the stories that objects tell."

"Is that what you think?"

"That's what I've observed. From your work." He paused. "From you."

I set aside the laptop and turned to face him fully. His apartment was small enough that we were very close—close enough that I could see the particular shade of his eyes, the slight imperfection in his left eyebrow, the way his lips curved when he was thinking.

"What else have you observed?"

"About you?"

"About me."

He considered the question, his expression thoughtful.

"You're braver than you know. You think fear is weakness, but you do things anyway, despite the fear. That's the real courage."

"What else?"

"You love deeply. Too deeply, sometimes. You're afraid of that love because it's destroyed you before. But you keep trying. Keep opening. Keep letting people in even when every instinct screams at you to hide."

"What else?"

"You're beautiful." His voice softened. "Not just your face—though that too. Your soul is beautiful. The way you care. The way you create. The way you see the world, even when the world has been cruel to you."

I kissed him then—not gently, not tentatively, but with all the feeling his words had stirred up. He responded in kind, his hands finding my face, my shoulders, the back of my neck.

"Bed," he said against my lips. "Now."

"Are you sure?"

"Not for—we don't have to—" He pulled back slightly, breathless. "I just want to be close to you. Is that okay?"

"More than okay."

We migrated to his small bed—barely big enough for two people, which meant we had to press together, had to tangle our limbs and share our breath. We didn't do anything more than hold each other, kiss each other, exist in the particular intimacy of bodies aligned. But it was enough. More than enough.

"Stay tonight?"

"I thought you'd never ask."

On day ten, we went to my mother's house. The renovation had finally begun in earnest. Construction equipment cluttered the front yard, and the sounds of work echoed from somewhere inside—hammers and drills and the particular cacophony of things being torn apart so they could be rebuilt. But we weren't here for the construction. We were here for the garden.

Lego was already there when we arrived, knee-deep in what had once been an overgrown flower bed and was now something approaching intentional. He was wearing overalls that were probably expensive and were definitely covered in dirt, his hair pulled back in a messy bun, his expression one of fierce concentration. And

beside him—closer than strictly necessary for gardening purposes—was Tui.

"P'Will! P'Est!" Lego waved enthusiastically, nearly losing his balance in the process. Tui's hand shot out automatically, steadying him with the practiced ease of someone who had done this many times. "You're here! Come help!"

"Help with what?" I asked, surveying the disaster area that was supposed to become a garden.

"Everything!" Lego bounced on his heels—gently, favoring his recovering knee. "We're planting the new rose section today. I've been preparing the beds all week. The soil is finally ready."

"The soil has been ready for three days," Tui said dryly. "Lego's been perfecting it obsessively since then."

"Perfection takes time, P'Tui."

"Perfection takes you waking up at 5 AM to test pH levels."

"The pH was very important!"

"The pH was an excuse to avoid sleeping like a normal person."

I watched their exchange with something that felt like wonder. The easy intimacy between them. The way Tui's hand had stayed on Lego's waist even after the steadying was done. The particular gentleness in his eyes when he looked at the younger man. This was what love looked like. Real, sustainable, everyday love.

"You two are adorable," Est said, pulling out his camera. "And I'm documenting this. For posterity."

"Documenting what?" Lego asked innocently.

"You being domestic. It's unprecedented."

"I've always been domestic! I cook! I clean! I have spreadsheets!"

"You have color-coded spreadsheets," Tui corrected. "That's beyond domestic. That's approaching clinical."

Lego swatted him with a gardening glove, and Tui caught his wrist, pulling him close enough to press a kiss to his forehead. The gesture was so natural, so unthinking, that it made my chest ache.

"Alright," I said, rolling up my sleeves. "Put me to work."

The next several hours were a masterclass in everything I'd never learned about gardening. Lego directed us like a general commanding troops—pointing out where

each plant should go, explaining the specific soil requirements for different species, monitoring our digging depth with terrifying precision.

"The roses need at least eighteen inches," he explained, watching me dig with a critical eye. "Their root systems need room to spread. If you plant them too shallow, they'll struggle to establish."

"How do you know all this?"

"Research. Your mother's notebooks. Trial and error." He crouched beside me, adjusting the angle of my shovel. "And Khun Somying at the flower shop. She's been teaching me for years."

"Years?"

"Since you stopped leaving your apartment." His voice was matter-of-fact, but I heard the weight beneath it. "Someone had to learn what your mother knew. Someone had to keep her garden plans alive until you were ready to finish them."

I stopped digging, looking at him—really looking. At the dirt on his face, the determination in his eyes, the particular stubbornness that had kept him coming back to me every Wednesday for three years.

"Thank you," I said. "For all of it. For never giving up."

"I never considered giving up." He smiled, bright and genuine. "You're worth the wait, P'Will. You always have been."

The afternoon brought more planting, more dirt, more of Lego's increasingly detailed instructions. But it also brought something else—moments of quiet intimacy scattered between the work. At one point, Est and I ended up at the far end of the garden, preparing a bed for hydrangeas. Tui and Lego were visible but not audible, working together near the back fence with the ease of long practice.

"They're good together." Est said, following my gaze.

"I know. It's still strange to see."

"Strange how?"

"Lego was mine for so long. The only person who showed up, who kept showing up." I dug into the soil, turning it over. "And now he has someone else. Someone who takes care of him the way he's always taken care of me."

"Are you jealous?" I considered the question honestly.

"A little. But mostly I'm—relieved? He deserves someone who sees how extraordinary he is. He deserves to be the one getting cared for, instead of always being the caregiver."

"That's a very healthy perspective."

"Therapy." I smiled slightly. "Though I reserve the right to threaten Tui if he ever hurts him."

Est laughed, startled. "You'd threaten Tui?"

"Absolutely. Lego is my little brother in everything but blood. If Tui breaks his heart, I will make his life extremely difficult."

"You know Tui could definitely take you in a fight, right? He's got at least twenty pounds on you."

"I never said I'd fight him. I said I'd make his life difficult. There are many ways to do that that don't involve physical confrontation."

"Such as?"

"I own several businesses. Businesses have lawyers. Lawyers are very good at making people's lives difficult."

Est stared at me for a moment, then burst out laughing. "William Jakrapatr, protective older brother. I didn't know you had it in you."

"I contain multitudes."

"Clearly." He leaned over and kissed me—brief, dirt-covered, perfect. "I love this version of you."

"Which version?"

"The version who loves fiercely. Who protects what's his. Who would weaponize lawyers to defend his best friend."

"That's very specific."

"You're very specific." He kissed me again. "I love that too."

By evening, the garden was transformed. Not finished—far from finished—but genuinely transformed. New beds had been prepared and planted. The rose bushes were in the ground, their roots settling into soil my mother had loved. The hydrangeas were positioned where they would eventually bloom in shades of blue and purple. The frangipani tree presided over it all, its white blossoms catching the last of the daylight.

"It's beautiful." Est said, photographing the progress from multiple angles.

"It will be beautiful," Lego corrected. "Right now it's just potential. But the potential is good."

"The potential is excellent."

We stood together—all four of us—looking at what we'd created. Tui's arm was around Lego's waist. My hand was in Est's. The evening light was golden and forgiving.

"Three months," Est said quietly. "When I come back, these will be blooming."

"We'll send you pictures," Lego promised. "Every week. So you can watch them grow."

"The documentation project expands."

"The documentation project never ends."

I looked at the garden—at the evidence of care and intention, at the physical manifestation of hope. This was what healing looked like. Not just for me, but for this space. For my mother's legacy.

"She would have loved this." I said.

"She does love it," Lego said firmly. "Wherever she is. She knows what we're doing. And she's proud."

I wanted to believe that. And maybe, standing there with the people I loved, surrounded by things that were growing—maybe I did.

On day seven, Est took me to Ink & Ashes. The tattoo studio was nothing like I'd expected. Not dark and intimidating, but warm and welcoming, with artwork covering every available surface and the particular hum of creativity in the air. Natural light filtered through large windows. Plants—clearly Lego's influence—dotted the corners. The scent of coffee mixed with something antiseptic but not unpleasant. Tui looked up from where he was organizing equipment, his expression shifting from professional focus to genuine welcome.

"William." He came around the counter to shake my hand. "Didn't expect to see you here."

"Est wanted to show me his world. This is part of it."

"Is it?" Tui glanced at Est with raised eyebrows. "I didn't know I was part of anyone's world."

"You're part of my favorite person's world," Est said, settling onto one of the waiting area couches with the ease of long familiarity. "That makes you significant."

"I'm choosing to be flattered by that."

Hong emerged from the back room, silver hair gleaming, sketchbook tucked under his arm. His expression when he saw me was complicated—not hostile, not exactly, but assessing.

"The artist," he said. "Come to see how real work gets done?"

"Hong." Tui warned.

"What? I'm being friendly. This is my friendly face."

"Your friendly face is terrifying."

"I prefer 'intense.' It's more flattering."

Despite the tension, something in Hong's manner had shifted since the exhibition closing. Less guarded. More willing to engage.

"I'd actually love a tour," I said. "If you have time."

Hong studied me for a moment. Then something that might have been approval flickered across his face.

"Fine. But touch anything without permission and I'll ban you for life."

"That seems reasonable."

"It's more than reasonable. It's generous."

The tour was more extensive than I'd expected. Hong walked me through every aspect of the studio—the equipment, the techniques, the particular art of permanent mark-making. His own work was displayed throughout, delicate nature-inspired designs that seemed almost too beautiful to exist on skin.

"These are incredible," I said, stopping in front of a portfolio of completed pieces. Moths and flowers and intricate geometric patterns that seemed to breathe with life. "The detail work. The shading."

"It's just another medium." But pride colored his voice. "Like oil paint. Like charcoal. Just happens to be skin instead of canvas."

"There's something permanent about it. Something—intimate."

"Every piece of art is intimate. The difference is that tattoos can't be hidden in a closet or sold to a collector. They stay with you. Become part of you."

I thought about my paintings—hanging in galleries and private collections, separate from me the moment they left my studio. About the particular vulnerability of creating something that would exist on someone's body forever.



"I don't think I could do what you do," I admitted. "The pressure. Knowing you can't erase mistakes."

"You can fix most mistakes. Cover them, rework them. It's not as permanent as people think." Hong set down his portfolio. "But yes. There's pressure. That's part of what makes it meaningful."

We continued through the studio—past the main work areas, through a small hallway lined with design mockups, into Hong's personal workspace at the back. It was organized chaos, sketches covering every surface, reference images pinned to the walls.

"This is where the magic happens?" I asked.

"This is where I pretend to know what I'm doing until something works." He gestured at a series of designs in progress. "These are for a client. Full back piece. She wants a garden scene—very detailed, very personal. It's taking months to plan."

"It looks beautiful."

"It looks unfinished. Which is all art looks like until it isn't."

I studied the designs—the careful lines, the attention to detail, the particular way Hong had captured movement and light in what would eventually be permanent ink.

"Thank you," I said. "For showing me this. For—" I paused, searching for words. "For not hating me anymore."

Hong's expression flickered. "I never hated you."

"You definitely didn't like me."

"I didn't trust you. There's a difference." He met my eyes directly. "You hurt someone I care about. That's not something I take lightly."

"I know. I'm—"

"But," Hong continued, cutting off my apology, "you also did the work. Changed. Showed up differently." A ghost of a smile. "That's rare. Most people just apologize and expect forgiveness without actually becoming different."

"I'm trying."

"I can see that." He extended his hand. "Clean slate. Starting now."

I shook it, feeling something shift between us. A door opening. A possibility emerging.

"Clean slate."

After the tour, I found Est in the main studio, photographing Tui at work. A client had arrived during my time with Hong—a young woman getting color added to an existing piece on her forearm. Tui was bent over her arm, his focus absolute, while Est circled them with his camera, capturing the process from every angle.

And Lego—Lego had appeared at some point, settling into what was clearly his usual spot on a comfortable chair in the corner. He was still wearing his knee brace, though the smaller one now, and he'd changed into something softer—an oversized sweater that I was fairly certain belonged to Tui.

"P'Will!" He waved me over with a brightness that never seemed to dim. "Come sit! We have snacks!"

I settled beside him, accepting the cookie he pressed into my hand.

"You spend a lot of time here." I observed.

"It's my third home." Lego pulled his legs up, tucking them beneath him. "P'Tui works late sometimes. I like being close."

"That's sweet."

"That's practical. He forgets to eat when he's working. Someone has to remind him."

I watched Tui work—the careful precision of his movements, the gentle way he held the client's arm. Every few minutes, he'd glance up, find Lego in the corner, and something in his expression would soften before he returned to his task.

"He loves you." I said quietly.

"I know." Lego's voice was just as quiet. "I still can't believe it sometimes. That someone like him could want someone like me."

"Someone like you?"

"Loud. Chaotic. Too much energy." He shrugged, but his eyes stayed on Tui. "I've been told I'm a lot. That I exhaust people."

"You're not too much. You're exactly enough."

"That's what P'Tui says."

"He's right."

Lego turned to look at me, something vulnerable in his expression. "You really think so?"

"I know so. You're the reason I survived, Lego. The reason I'm here, having this conversation, instead of—" I stopped, not wanting to voice the alternative. "You

were never too much. You were exactly what I needed. What a lot of people need."

His eyes were bright when he looked away, but he was smiling.

"P'Will." His voice was thick. "You can't say things like that. I'll start crying, and then P'Tui will think something's wrong, and then he'll stop working to check on me, and then the client will have to wait—"

"You're ridiculous."

"I'm emotional. There's a difference."

I laughed, and across the room, Est looked up from his camera with a questioning smile. I just shook my head, still chuckling, and watched him return to his work. This was his world. These people, this space, this particular combination of art and love and found family. And he was letting me be part of it.

Later, when Tui had finished with his client and Est had gotten all the shots he needed, we gathered in the small patio behind the studio. It was becoming a familiar space now—the hanging plants, the mismatched furniture, the fairy lights that Lego had insisted on installing. The four of us settled into comfortable positions, drinks in hand, the evening settling around us like a blanket.

"So," Tui said, looking at me with an expression that was half-amused, half-challenging. "What's the verdict?"

"On?"

"The studio. The work. All of it."

"I'm impressed," I admitted. "It's not what I expected."

"What did you expect?"

"Something darker. Grungier. More—" I searched for the word. "Underground."

"We're legitimate business owners, not cartoon villains." Tui's voice was dry. "We pay taxes and everything."

"I didn't mean—"

"He's teasing you," Lego interrupted, nudging Tui with his shoulder. "P'Tui, be nice."

"I'm always nice."

"You're occasionally nice. When it suits you."

"Same thing."

They were sitting pressed together on the small loveseat, Tui's arm draped around

Lego's shoulders, Lego's head tilted to rest against him. The intimacy was so natural, so unforced, that it made my heart ache. Est caught my eye across the space, raising an eyebrow. See? his expression seemed to say. This is what they're like. All the time. I smiled back, hoping my eyes communicated what I couldn't say aloud: I want this. With you. Someday.

"Est tells me you've been doing better," Tui said, his voice shifting to something more serious. "That the therapy is helping."

"It is. Slowly."

"Recovery is always slow. Fast recovery is usually just denial in disguise."

"Speaking from experience?" Tui's expression flickered—something old and painful crossing his face before he smoothed it away.

"Speaking from observation," he said. "I've seen a lot of people try to heal. The ones who succeed are the ones who accept that it takes time."

"P'Tui went through his own stuff," Lego added quietly. "Before we met. He doesn't talk about it much, but—"

"Lego."

"He should know. If he's going to be around." Lego looked at Tui with an expression that was both soft and stubborn. "Everyone has a past, P'Tui. Everyone has things they survived. That's not weakness. That's proof you're still here."

Something passed between them—a whole conversation in a glance. Then Tui sighed, the tension leaving his shoulders.

"Fine." He looked at me directly. "Short version: I had a relationship that nearly destroyed me. I spent a year after it ended convinced I was too damaged for anyone else. I almost didn't let Lego in because I thought I'd hurt him."

"What changed?"

"He did." Tui's voice softened as he looked at Lego. "He refused to give up. He kept showing up, kept being patient, kept proving that I could trust again. Eventually, I believed him."

"Eventually," Lego echoed, smiling. "After approximately six months of me being very obvious and you being very oblivious."

"I wasn't oblivious. I was cautious."

"You were terrified."

"Same thing."

They kissed—brief, sweet, the particular intimacy of people who had fought for each other and won.

"That's what love looks like," Est said quietly, for my ears only. "When it works. When both people are willing to be brave."

I reached for his hand under the table.

"We can be brave." I said.

"We already are."

On day five, I took Est to see the rest of my mother's legacy. The café was first—Morning Light, with its mismatched furniture and local art on the walls. Siri greeted us with tears and embraces and the best coffee I'd had in years. We didn't stay long, but it was enough. Enough to remember. Enough to begin reclaiming.

The flower shop came next, where Khun Somying showed us the greenhouse my mother had built. Glass walls and ceiling, plants everywhere, the particular scent of growing things. Est photographed everything while I walked among the orchids and ferns, touching leaves and petals, trying to feel some connection to the woman who had created this space.

On day two, Est came to my apartment.

We both knew what this night was. The last one before everything changed. The final hours of our countdown, ticking away with the relentless certainty of time. I'd prepared everything with care that bordered on obsession. Cleaned every surface. Cooked dinner—actual dinner, not just toast, following recipes Lego had sent me with increasingly emphatic instructions. Lit candles throughout the apartment, creating a warmth that softened the cool glass and steel of my usually austere space.

"You did all this?" Est asked, stepping inside and looking around at the transformation.

"I wanted tonight to be—" I struggled for the word. "Memorable."

"It's already memorable." He set down his bag and crossed to me, his hands finding my waist with the familiarity we'd built over the past two weeks. "Everything with you is memorable."

The kiss was gentle at first, almost tentative. Then deeper. More urgent. The particular desperation of people who knew they were running out of time.

"Dinner first," I said, forcing myself to pull back. "I actually cooked. It would be a waste to let it get cold."

"Dinner can wait."

"Est—"

"Or not." He kissed me again, then stepped back with a rueful smile. "You're right. Dinner first. But afterward—"

"Afterward," I agreed. "Everything."

Dinner was imperfect and perfect.

The food was better than I'd expected—Lego's instructions had been very detailed—and the conversation flowed easily, the way it always did between us now. We talked about the tour, about the house renovation, about everything he would miss and everything I would do while he was gone. But beneath the words, something else was building.

I watched his hands as he ate—the particular way he held his fork, the grace of his movements. I watched his mouth when he spoke—the way his lips formed words, the smile that kept appearing and disappearing. I watched his eyes—dark and bright and full of everything he wasn't saying.

"You're staring," he said eventually.

"I'm memorizing."

"Memorizing what?"

"Everything." I set down my own fork. "I want to remember exactly how you look tonight. So when I miss you—and I'm going to miss you constantly—I can close my eyes and see this."

"William—"

"I know it sounds dramatic. I know three months isn't that long. But I've spent three years not letting anyone close, and now you're about to be on the other side of the world, and I—" My voice cracked. "I just want to remember."

He stood from his chair and circled the table to me, taking my face in his hands.

"You're not going to forget me," he said. "I'm going to call you every day. Send you pictures of every country. Write you messages that are probably too long and too emotional. You're going to be so sick of hearing from me—"

"Never."

"—that you'll be relieved when I finally come home just so you can have some peace and quiet."

"Never," I repeated. "I will never be sick of hearing from you. I will never want peace and quiet if it means not having you in my life."

"That's very dramatic."

"I'm a dramatic person. It's one of my less charming qualities."

He laughed—that bright, warm sound I loved—and kissed me. This time, neither of us pulled away.

Afterward, we lay tangled together in my bed, the Bangkok skyline glittering beyond the windows, the night settling around us like a benediction.

"Thank you." Est said, his voice soft in the darkness.

"For what?"

"For being patient. For waiting until it was right. For—" He shifted, pressing closer, his breath warm on my neck. "For being you."

"I should be thanking you."

"Then thank me."

"Thank you." I kissed his hair. "For everything. For all of it. For every moment of the past two weeks and every moment still to come."

"Three months."

"Three months."

"It's going to feel like forever."

"No," I said, pulling him closer. "It's going to feel like exactly as long as it is. And then it will be over, and you'll be home, and we'll have the rest of our lives to make up for the time apart."

"Promise?"

"Promise."

We fell asleep like that—wrapped around each other, the boundaries between his body and mine blurred into irrelevance.

Tomorrow, he would leave. But tonight, he was here. And that was everything.

I woke to soft light and softer breathing. Est was still asleep, his face peaceful in a way I rarely saw during waking hours. I watched him for a long time, memorizing every detail—the curve of his eyelashes, the way his hair fell across his forehead, the small sound he made when he shifted in his sleep.

Today was the day.

The thought landed in my chest like a stone, but I didn't let myself spiral. Didn't let the anxiety take hold. Instead, I focused on the physical reality of this moment: Est beside me, warm and present, real in a way that dreams never were.

"Stop watching me sleep," he mumbled, eyes still closed. "It's creepy."

"It's romantic."

"It's both." He opened one eye. "What time is it?"

"Early. We have time."

"Time for what?"

I kissed him—soft, thorough, the kind of kiss that said I'm going to miss you without the words.

"Time for this," I said when we separated. "For as long as we have."

The airport was chaos, as airports always are. We arrived as a group: me and Est, Tui and Lego, Hong and Nut. Nut had driven, his car somehow accommodating all of us plus Est's substantial luggage. Lego was already crying.

"It's just three months," Est said, for approximately the fifteenth time since we'd gotten in the car. "I'll call every day."

"I know," Lego sniffled. "I'm not crying because I'm sad. I'm crying because I'm happy. And proud. And also sad. Emotions are complicated."

"They really are."

We made our way through the airport—The departure board showed everything: the cities he would visit, the adventure that was about to begin.

"Okay," Nut said, checking his phone with professional efficiency. "Boarding starts in thirty minutes. Time for goodbyes."

We gathered in a loose circle, the particular formation of people who were about to say something difficult.



"I'm terrible at goodbyes," Est said. "So let's make this—"

"Meaningful," Lego interrupted. "We're making this meaningful. None of your 'quick and painless' nonsense."

"Lego—"

"I mean it." Lego stepped forward first, pulling Est into a tight embrace. "You're going to do amazing things. You're going to take beautiful photographs and see incredible places and live the dream you've been carrying forever. And when you come back, we're going to look at every single picture and you're going to tell us every single story and it's going to take days and I don't even care."

"Lego—"

"And I'm proud of you. So proud. You've worked so hard for this, and you deserve it, and—" His voice cracked. "And I'm going to miss you so much."

Est held him tightly, his own eyes bright.

"I'm going to miss you too. Take care of yourself, okay? Actually rest. Let Tui take care of you for once."

"I'll try."

"Don't just try. Do it."

They separated, both wiping their eyes. Tui stepped up next, pulling Est into a brief, firm embrace.

"If you need anything," Tui said quietly, "call. Any time. I mean it."

"I will."

"And take care of yourself out there. The world is big and you're—"

"Fragile?"

"Precious." Tui's voice was gruff. "You're precious to a lot of people. Don't forget that."

Hong was next, and his embrace was unexpectedly fierce.

"I'm not crying," he said, his voice thick.

"You're definitely crying."

"It's allergies."

"In an airport?"

"Airports are full of allergens. It's a known fact."

They separated, and Hong wiped his eyes with the back of his hand, not even trying to pretend anymore.

"Send pictures," he said. "Of everything. Especially the food."

"I will."

"And be safe. And be happy. And—" He stopped, struggling. "Just come back, okay? Come back to us."

"I promise."

Nut's goodbye was more professional—a firm handshake, a few quiet words about schedules and contacts—but there was warmth beneath the efficiency. And then it was my turn. Est turned to me, and suddenly the airport faded away. The noise, the crowds, the watching friends—all of it became background to this moment. This goodbye.

"Three months." I said, my voice steadier than I felt.

"Three months." he repeated.

"You're going to have an incredible time."

"I know."

"And when you come back—"

"You'll be here."

"I'll be here. Waiting. With the house that's further along and the garden that's growing and everything that's different and also the same."

"William—"

"I'm going to miss you," I said, and my voice cracked on the words. "Every day. Every hour. Every minute. I'm going to miss you so much it will hurt."

"I know."

"But I'm also so proud of you. So incredibly proud. You've worked for this your entire life, and now it's happening, and I get to be the person who watches you fly."

"You're not watching me fly. You're the reason I can."

"Est—"

"I mean it." He took my hands, holding them between us like something precious.

"Before you—before all of this—I wasn't sure I could do it. Wasn't sure I deserved it. But you see me, William. You see who I am and who I'm becoming, and you believe in both versions. That's—" His voice broke. "That's everything."

I pulled him into my arms, holding him as tightly as I dared, trying to communicate through touch what words couldn't capture.

"I love you." I whispered into his hair.

"I love you too."

"Three months."

"Three months."

"It will pass quickly."

"You keep saying that."

"I'm going to keep saying it until we both believe it."

We separated just enough to look at each other. His face was wet with tears—tears I was also crying, I realized, without knowing when they'd started.

"I'm going to call you as soon as I land." he said.

"I'll be waiting."

"And every day after that."

"I'll be waiting for that too."

"And when I come back—"

"We'll have forever."

He kissed me then—right there, in the middle of the airport, with everyone watching and strangers passing and the departure board counting down our remaining minutes. It was not the kind of kiss I would have been capable of three years ago. Not the kind of public affection that the old William could have managed. But I wasn't the old William anymore. I was someone new. Someone braver. Someone who had learned that love was worth being seen. When we finally separated, we were both breathing hard, both crying, both smiling despite the tears.

"I have to go." Est said.

"I know."

"I don't want to go."

"I know that too."

"But I'm going anyway. Because you're right. This is my dream. And I can't—I won't—give it up. Not even for you."

"I would never ask you to."

"I know." He squeezed my hands one last time. "That's why I love you."

The final boarding call echoed through the airport. Est stepped back, then back again, our hands separating finally, reluctantly.

"Three months!" he called across the growing distance.

"Three months!" I called back.

He turned toward the gate, then looked back one more time—a final glance, a final smile, a final moment of connection before he disappeared through the doorway and was gone. I stood there, staring at the gate where he'd disappeared, feeling the particular emptiness of watching someone you love walk away.

Lego appeared at my side, slipping his hand into mine. "He's going to be amazing." Lego said.

"I know."

"And we're going to be okay."

"I know that too."

"You actually believe it?"

I looked at the departure board—at the flight number, the destination, the evidence of Est's dream finally happening. Then I looked at the people around me—Tui with his arm around Lego, Hong wiping his eyes, Nut already checking his phone. The family Est had built. The family I was now part of.

"Yeah," I said. "I actually believe it."

The apartment felt empty when I returned. Not just quiet—though it was that too—but empty in a way it hadn't been for weeks. The particular absence of someone who was supposed to be there. I stood in the doorway for a long moment, feeling the weight of the silence.

Three months.

But I wasn't alone. That was the thing Est had been trying to tell me, right before he

left. I had people now. I had a life.

I walked to the window—the one I'd opened that first morning, weeks ago, letting Bangkok's air touch my face for the first time in years. The city spread out below me, full of lives I would never know, full of stories I would never hear. But I was part of it now. Connected. Present.

My phone buzzed.

Est: Taking off now. I'll call when I land. I love you.

William: I love you too. Fly safe.

Est: Three months.

William: Three months.

Est: It's going to pass quickly.

I looked at his words, at the promise they contained, at the future they were building toward.

William: I know. This time, I actually believe it.

Est: Good. Hold onto that.

Est: I'm holding onto you.

The plane would be in the air now. Est would be looking out the window, watching Bangkok shrink beneath him, watching his old life become small and distant as his new adventure began. And I would be here. Growing. Healing. Becoming the person he would come home to.

I thought about the house—the renovation in progress, the garden taking shape under Lego's care, the evidence of hope and intention.

I thought about my mother—her cafés and her flower shop and her greenhouse, all the pieces of her legacy I was finally ready to claim.

I thought about the friends I'd made—Tui and Hong and Nut and everyone else who had welcomed me into their circle. And I thought about Est. About the three months stretching ahead of us, full of distance and longing and the particular ache of missing someone who was worth missing.

It would be hard. Some days would be terrible. The loneliness would hit at unexpected moments, and the anxiety would try to convince me that this was all a mistake. But I would survive it. The way I'd survived everything else.

And on the other side—On the other side, Est would be waiting. Changed by his

adventures, grown by his experiences, but still the same person who had seen me in a gallery and looked past the walls I'd built.

Three months.

They would pass.

And when they did, everything would be different and also the same.

Go be brave, my mother had said, once upon a time.

I was finally learning what that meant.